

ONE FOR ONE HUNDRED

Hitherto Unpublished Story of Thrilling Civil War Incident in Shenandoah Valley

EARLY in 1864 an unfortunate episode occurred in the town of Front Royal, Warren county, Va., by reason of which a considerable number of men in both the Federal and Confederate armies lost their lives in a most ignominious way. Briefly, that episode was as follows:

Several of Col. John S. Mosby's command, the 43d Separate Battalion of Cavalry, were on furlough at Front Royal and, having been informed that a Federal sutler's train was approaching the town, and having been joined by several young men of scant age for army service, they prepared an ambush for the purpose of throwing the train into confusion and being able thereby to acquire such stores as might be of value to the cause for which they were fighting.

Unfortunately, however, and absolutely without the knowledge of those composing the ambush, there were several ambulances filled with wounded men of Custer's cavalry command interspersed at different points in the wagon train, and these during the action which followed the ambush were more or less under fire, although it is not believed that any of the occupants of the ambulances were killed or wounded.

The escort of the train, part of a regiment of Michigan cavalry, suffered to a greater extent, and although the attacking force was too small to make a very serious impression on the train, several of the Federal soldiers were killed or wounded.

FINDING out from sources unknown, that the attacking party had been composed in part of "Mosby's Guerrillas," a cry was raised and when, a few days afterward, seven of this command were captured by Federal cavalry, as were also a few of the militant youth, the captives were either hanged or summarily disposed of in a less civilized manner.

This action on the part of the Federals brought a vow of vengeance by Col. Mosby and was shortly followed by the hanging of several Federal prisoners on Grindstone hill, just west of Berryville, Va. One excess brought on another, and for several months no quarter was given by either Mosby's command and that of Gen. Custer to members of the opposite command who were so unfortunate as to fall into the hands of their enemies.

This was the situation in the spring of 1864, when, through the success of certain movements, over 500 of the men of Custer's command had been taken prisoners by the 43d Separate Battalion and were concentrated at a point near the top of the Blue Ridge at Ashby's gap and within a few miles of the small town of Paris, Va.

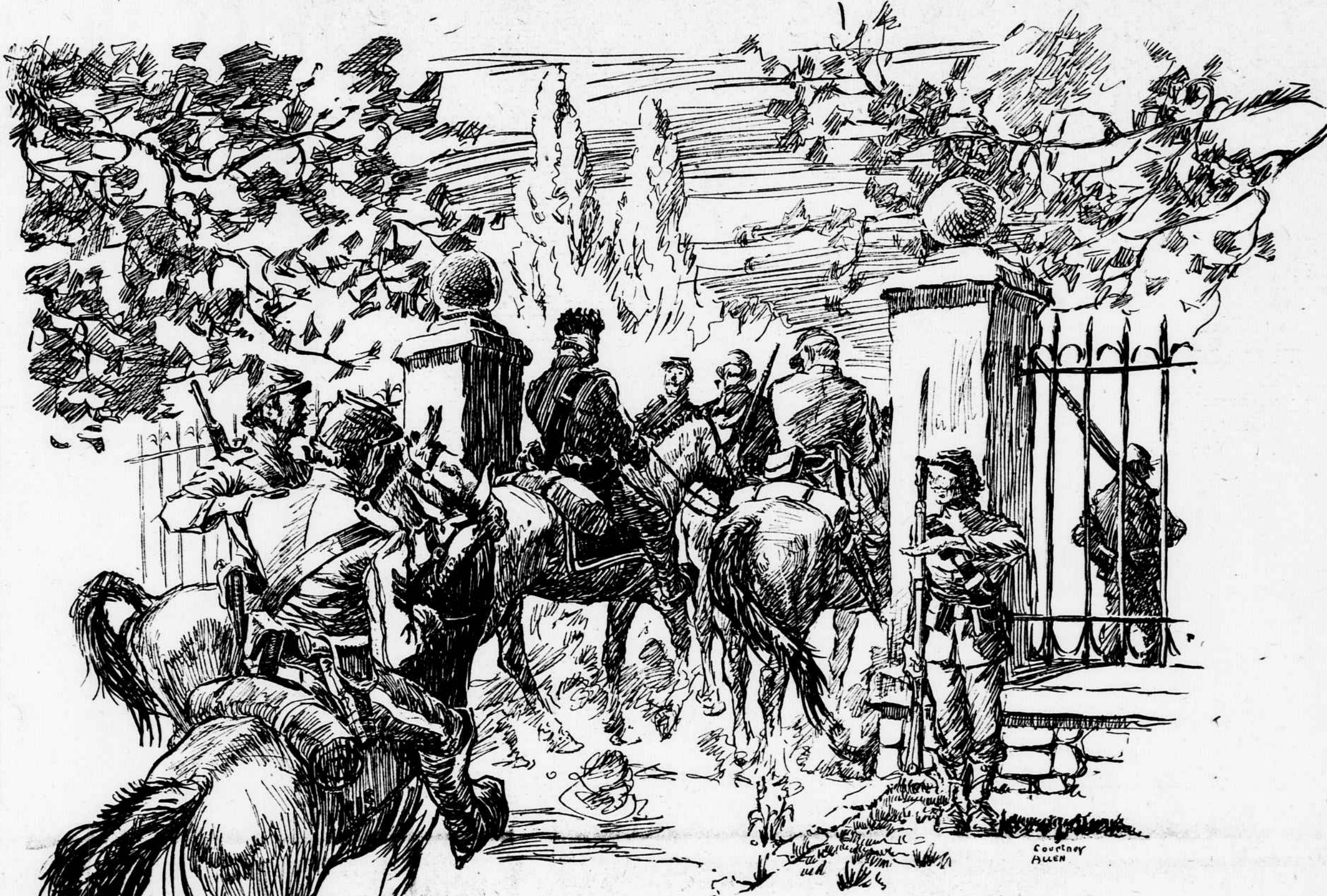
Every effort having been made by Mosby, through letters and messages to Gen. Custer, to stop the wholesale slaughter without success, Col. Mosby decided, in order to protect his men taken prisoners in future, and to show the Federals that he would exact an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, that he would hang one man in five of his prisoners as an example. This was followed by the celebrated civil war incident, at which the whole 500 Federal prisoners were paraded in line and compelled to draw lots from a hat presented to them by their captors—a scene which the writer does not believe that he or any other writer has the ability to describe.

Several heart-breaking incidents occurred, in one of which a drummer boy of tender years was so unfortunate as to draw one of the fatal balls, but through his fright, misery and anguish so moved Mosby that he roughly ordered the poor chap be eliminated from the unfortunate. There was another incident of two brothers, standing side by side, one being successful in the lottery of death and the other doomed to die.

No matter what the cause, the hanging of 100 Americans in cold blood was hardly a reliable job for other Americans, and there were many murmurs of disapproval by the assembled members of the 43d Separate Battalion. Mosby, kind at heart in spite of his trade, was also impressed, especially when over a hundred letters were written to him from those condemned to die and written, as they supposed, in the presence of death, to their loved ones at home.

It was known that the command of Gen. Custer, which had been the prime cause of the "war to the knife, and without quarter," lay in the valley of Virginia and in direct line with Winchester, and any one attempting to reach the latter city and Gen. Sheridan must of necessity pass through these enemies.

Brave as were the men of the 43d Battalion, and as willing to give battle to a superior number of the enemy as any man ever living, Mosby, who could not order under the circumstances, but had simply to request, found the selection of a truce flag bearer a difficult proposition. Four of the most courageous members of his command, men tried in hundreds of battles and skirmishes, frankly informed him that he could hang them himself for refusal to obey his orders, but attempt to get in touch with Sheridan through the line of Custer at Millwood they would not. They preferred, if death



"I WAS BLINDFOLDED, PUT ON MY HORSE, AND WITH A NUMBER OF MEN SURROUNDING ME, WAS STARTED OUT INTO THE ROAD."

had to come to them, to die within their own lines, and that death could possibly pass them by, if in the hands of Custer's Michigan cavalry, was more fanciful than that it would snow in July. No, do as he pleased with them, but through Custer to Sheridan, even with a flag of truce, they would not!

Mosby was about to abandon the noble impulse which had prompted him when he suddenly thought of a young soldier of his command, Lieut. John S. Russell, who not only had stood by him in many close places, but who had himself brought into camp fifty-five of the very prisoners then under sentence of hanging.

As a last resort he sent for John, and after explaining fully to him his desire that a letter he had written Gen. Sheridan begging that this inhuman sort of warfare stop, and offering that, in the event of his men being in future treated as any other Confederate belligerents, he would rescind the sentence of death on the unfortunate one hundred and send them as prisoners of war to Richmond, and after further telling him that already four of his comrades had stated that they preferred being hanged by Mosby rather than the certainty of being hanged by Custer and had therefore flatly refused to undertake the mission, asked him if he felt that he could or would attempt to get through.

Lieut. Russell had just witnessed the fatal drawing of lots and had witnessed also the heartrending human feelings brought out in the unfortunate one hundred, and his heart was touched. He recognized the peril of the trip. He fully knew that unless good luck, the very best sort of luck, attended him, he would soon find himself hanging high to an oak limb without having had a chance to explain that his efforts were in the cause of saving the lives of one hundred miserable beings who wore the same uniforms as did his executioners.

In an attempt to save the lives of one hundred Americans it was very well worth the effort.

With little hesitation and without the slightest sign of heroics, he informed his commander that he would go—that he would take the letter to Gen. Sheridan, deliver it into the general's hand—if he was able to get by Gen. Custer's men without being hung or shot at sight.

Now let us use Lieut. Russell's own words as to what occurred:

"THE colonel looked at me for a minute or so and then said, 'John, you know what you are going up against, don't you?' 'Yes, colonel,' I told him. 'I know it is going to be hell to get through Custer's men at Millwood, but I can't think of those boys and men up there in the gap being hung simply because I am afraid of making the attempt.'"

"The colonel told me that he would keep every man of his command on the east side of the Shenandoah river till I got back, or until he got word that they had hanged or shot me."

"There was nothing else to say, so he gave me a letter, sealed, to Gen. Philip H. Sheridan, commanding the United States forces in the valley of Virginia, and about a hundred letters written by the condemned prisoners to mothers, sisters, wives and other relatives at home. There were several letters written by officers among those condemned to Gen. Sheridan, who I supposed they believed might help them, and I wrapped all these letters in a piece of paper and put them in my pocket."

"I studied a while, and I believe I was a little 'skinned.' I asked him if I could stay all night at Pagebrook and he said no. I then asked him if I could sleep in the barn, and he told me he would rather I went somewhere else. He was, naturally, afraid the Yankees would come and find me there and burn his house. I did not blame the old gentleman at all."

"I told him that maybe I would take a chance on the barn, but he need not know I was there. He then asked me to come on down and get supper, which I was very glad to do. I put up my horse, put the saddle and bridle near at hand and went to sleep in the feed room, after having made up my mind to try again in the morning."

"I was up before sun-up, fed my horse and when he was through eating, saddled him and rode out in the back road again. After I had got to the clearing I saw a vidette up the road and commenced waving my white handkerchief again. He shouted to me to halt. He was about a hundred yards or more away from me. I halted and he commenced to call, 'Officer of the guard! Officer of the guard!'"

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BY HENRY W. CARPENTER.

AS THE speeding motor tourist passes over the smooth macadam turnpike between the little town of Berryville and the historic city of Winchester, Va., this summer he may, possibly, be met by a keen, soldierly old gentleman quietly ambling along the roadside on a gray horse.

This sturdy old soldier of more than seventy-five years is none other than Lieut. John S. Russell, now a farmer. Russell served with Col. John Singleton Mosby's 43d (regular) Separate Battalion of Confederate Cavalry, and, although both the Federal and Confederate armies were filled with brave and daring men, it must in truth be said that not one of them excelled this little gray man in cool daring and steadfast courage.

The following and heretofore unrecorded tale has to do with an incident in the service of this soldier which for sheer heroism and self-sacrifice has never been exceeded by any soldier, in any army, at any time, in the history of this world, as well as with the noble generosity and full-hearted kindness of one of America's greatest military commanders in any war, Gen. Philip H. Sheridan.

"Greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friend," and greater still his enemies.

by to Gen. Sheridan and wanted to go through to Winchester to deliver it, but he said as I belonged to Mosby's command he had orders to shoot on sight.

"I told him that Mosby had 100 man prisoners who were going to be hanged unless I got through to Sheridan, or if he shot me, and advised him not to do it. I think I was a little upset for a while. He sent one of his men away, and after about fifteen minutes a colonel came galloping up with his staff and an escort."

"THIS colonel asked me what I wanted—came right up to me and seemed to be a very good sort of a man, by his conversation. I told him what I had told the other officer and he said that I had better give him the letter from Col. Mosby, as well as the other letters. I told him I had orders to deliver the letters to Gen. Philip H. Sheridan and that, while he could kill me and take them away from me, he would only get them in that way. I intended to obey my orders if I possibly could."

"The colonel, after thinking a while, said he would take a chance of taking me to Gen. Custer, and they fell in around me and we rode up the road toward the west. About a mile from that place we turned into a lawn where there were a large number of horses tied to the fence and trees and some soldiers lounging around, and rode up to the porch, where I was told to dismount."

"As I was getting off my horse a young man with long yellow hair hanging down over his shoulders, came out of the door and, after saluting, the colonel told him what had happened."

"When the colonel stated that I was one of Mosby's men, and before he said anything about the letters, this young man, who I knew by description to be Custer, shouted: 'I will hang the — to the first limb in the woods!' The colonel went on telling him about the one hundred prisoners about to be hanged and then he cooled down."

"He told them to take me inside, which they did, and then said to me: 'Give me those letters. I told him that he had force enough to take them away from me, but I had orders to deliver the letters to Gen. Sheridan and I intended to do so unless he took them.'"

"He then went across the hall and called several officers and shut the door. What they talked about I don't know, but while they were away the colonel and several other officers came up to me and asked me about the men who were to be hanged. I told them I did not know anything about it except that I thought the colonel intended hanging them in retaliation for our men that they had hanged at Front Royal and elsewhere."

men surrounding me, was started out into the road again.

"We evidently passed through a considerable camp of cavalry, for I could hear horses on all sides of me, and a number of men shouted."

"The shouts and taunts continued for several miles, at intervals. 'About midway we got to Winchester and halted at the house on the corner of Loudoun and Piccadilly streets, where the Evans Hotel now stands, which was the headquarters of Maj. Parsons, Gen. Sheridan's provost marshal."

"They told me to get down. I was led inside and the bandage taken off my eyes. There was a small, nice-looking officer in the room and he asked the officer who came in with me, a captain or lieutenant, I think, who I was. On being informed he told me that he was the provost marshal and that I should give him the letters. I told him that I had orders to deliver them to Gen. Sheridan and that I would do so unless they were taken away from me by force. He thought for a moment, asked the officer with me as to his orders, and then said that I was right to obey my orders and that he would send me to Gen. Sheridan's headquarters. The latter were in the house of Lloyd Logan, a citizen of Winchester, and thither I was taken by two soldiers as guards. They had never offered to take my side arms from me, but the provost marshal had directed that my horse be taken away and cared for."

AFTER arriving at Gen. Sheridan's headquarters I was taken into a long room like a parlor, with a number of officers and men at the far end, and told to sit down. The two guards sat one on each side of me. I don't know how long I waited, but after a while a group of officers rode up in front of the house and dismounted. They came up on the porch, led by a handsome officer, who passed down to the end of the room and sat at a desk."

"One of my guards told me that he was Adj. Gen. Russell, a New Yorker. He had the same name as my own." After a while he beckoned to one of my guards and talked to him for a while and I was then directed to come to his desk. He received me very courteously, stated that he understood that our names were the same, and after some further talk asked me to give him the letters to Gen. Sheridan, as he was undertaking such business."

"I told him that I would like to do as he suggested, but that I had orders to deliver the letters to Gen. Sheridan in person."

"Gen. Russell laughed and said that I was perfectly right in obeying orders and that if I would wait for a few minutes, possibly about half an hour, Gen. Sheridan would be in. I told him that I was sent there to wait and would wait as long as it was necessary."

him into a room and the door was closed. In a few minutes Gen. Russell came out and told my guards to take me to the general."

"I entered the room and found the general sitting at a table. He told the guards to go out and close the door. He then asked me what I wanted and I told him that I had a letter from Col. Mosby as well as about a hundred letters from some Federal prisoners who were under sentence to be hanged. I handed him the letter and told him I had been ordered to put them in his hands, and I had done so, in spite of the effort of the officer near Pagebrook, Gen. Custer at his headquarters, the provost marshal at Winchester, and finally Gen. Russell, to get me to give them up to them."

"He smiled and said that no man could fail in his duty if he obeyed his orders. He asked me to sit down while he read the letter from Col. Mosby."

"When he was through reading he looked over the letters from the prisoners and then asked me whether I did not think it was cruel and inhuman to hang these men? I told him I certainly did, but that this execution, as well as others that had taken place on our side, was in retaliation for the same work on the part of his men and that the latter had started the whole wretched business by executing the man in Front Royal for ambushing the train."

"He asked me whether I did not think it a breach of civilized warfare for our men to have fired on the train in the first place, and I told him that I did think so but for the fact that it had been done under a misapprehension and that the men engaged in the ambush had no idea the train contained anything but sutlers and supply wagons; that these men were simply trying to get a chance to get some of the supplies contained in the wagons by stampeding the wagon guard."

"At this Gen. Sheridan laughed and remarked, 'Just like Mosby—always looking for a chance to get at the eatables.' I laughed a little also, for there was some truth in what he said. He asked me as to how I was able to get to Winchester, and I told him fully; also about being fired on so briskly when I was waving a flag of truce."

"AT this he became very grave and stated that there was no excuse for such conduct, the only explanation being the state of mind of Gen. Custer, always a hot head, and his men, who were of the self-same Michigan cavalry which had figured in the Front Royal affair."

"However, he said that he would see that nothing like that happened again and complimented me on keeping on with my mission when I had every excuse for going back. I told him that I wanted to go back, but could not get the faces of the prisoners out of my mind."

"He got up, stuck out his hand to me and complimented me on doing what I had done and the way I felt about it. He said I was to go to the Taylor House, where I would be given a room and fed, and to wait there till he sent for me, as he would have to communicate with Gen. Grant before he could answer the letter received from Col. Mosby."

"He then called a man named called in the guard as well as one of his aids, and told the latter that I was to be put up at the Taylor House, and, turning to me, said, 'Of course, with the understanding that you will give me your word not to leave Winchester without my permission.' I gave it."

"I was fed, wine and dined, as well as visited and talked with by officers of all grades until the next day, when about 11 o'clock I was sent for to report at Gen. Sheridan's headquarters."

"The general had a letter addressed to Col. Mosby and sealed, and he said he wanted me to deliver it. He said that he would send an escort of cavalry with me as far as Millwood in order to protect me from annoyance by the Federal troops, for feeling against Mosby and his men was running high at that time. He asked me if I could guarantee that the escort would not be attacked when Millwood was reached, and although I had Col. Mosby's word that none of our men would be allowed on the west side of the Shenandoah river until my mission was finished one way or another, I did not think it necessary to tell the general this fact, and therefore told him that I could not guarantee the escort against a sudden attack if the two parties met on the road and before I could stop our men."

"He was true enough. I told him that if he would send me with a small escort to Berryville I would guarantee that they would meet none of our men going around in that way and that we would miss any Federal troops, as Gen. Chapman of the Federal army was at Kennon's Shop with his brigade and we would not run into them, for they were three miles north of Berryville. Gen. Sheridan smiled and asked me how I knew where Gen. Chapman was, but I also smiled and said nothing."

"After agreeing to a proposal he bid me good-bye and it was not long before I was back at Paris with the answer to the colonel's letter. The escort treated me like a prince all the way and we had quite a time of it, for they had more than one bottle of champagne and put three in my saddle-pockets when I left them at Millwood. I had a chance to stay all night at my home in Berryville, which was really the reason why I suggested that route instead of the one to Millwood direct."

"I don't know what the letter contained any more than I know the wording of the first one, but I do know that the one hundred prisoners were not hanged and from that time hangings on account of the Front Royal incident and incidents growing out of it were stopped."